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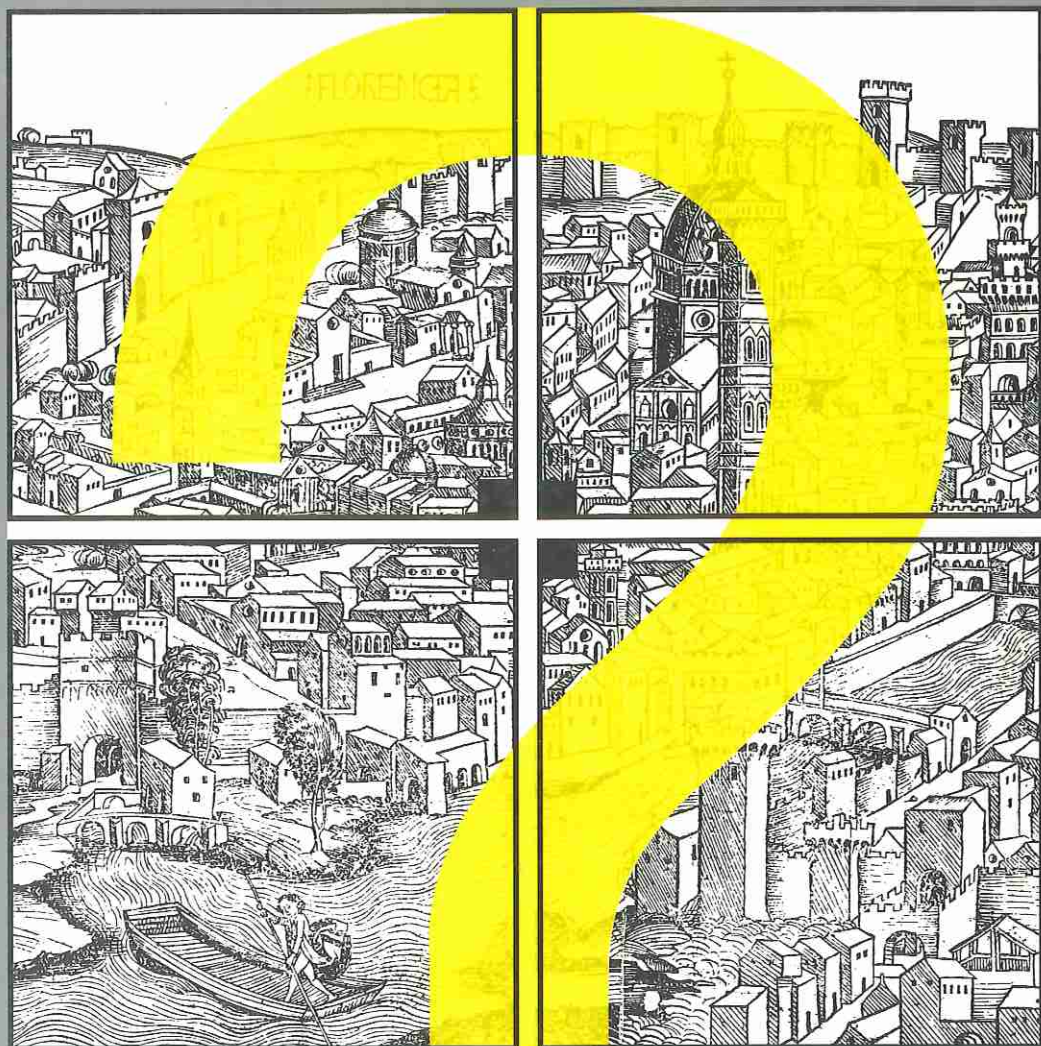


UNIVERSITÀ DEGLI STUDI DI FIRENZE  
DIPARTIMENTO DI PROGETTAZIONE DELL'ARCHITETTURA  
SEZIONE ARCHITETTURA E CONTESTO



# TRANSFORMATIONS OF URBAN FORM

## FROM INTERPRETATIONS TO METHODOLOGIES IN PRACTICE



# ISUF '99

## SIXTH INTERNATIONAL SEMINAR ON URBAN FORM

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Florence, 23 – 26 July 1999



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**TRANSFORMATIONS OF URBAN FORM**  
FROM INTERPRETATIONS TO METHODOLOGIES IN PRACTICE

A cura di Roberto Corona e Gian Luigi Maffei

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## URBAN FORM AND GREAT PROJECTS IN BERLIN

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### ABSTRACT

Major changes are defining the image of Berlin as the new capital of reunited Germany. At the level of the metropolis, the new zoning plan, to preserve from the peripheral sprawl, follows a pattern of polycentric expansion, structured upon the development of the railway network. Meanwhile, in the inner-city great urban projects are carried out often resorting to international competitions. Such projects are characterized by a strong individual mark, according to two juxtaposed cultural positions: the "internationalist" one, leaning towards hi-tech solutions and spectacular architecture, and the one inspired by the so called "critical reconstruction", based upon the re-proposal (sometimes too literally) of urban forms belonging to the historical city.

### INTRODUCTION

The city of Berlin represents a peculiar case within the transforming landscape of the major European cities, given the interests, resources and projects involved around this city after three substantial events: the collapsing of the Wall (1989), the German reunification (1990), the decision to make Berlin the capital of the new Federal Republic (1991).

It is this last issue in particular which made faster and more significant the process of renewal and integration which was going to affect the city, after the end of the political and economic isolation Berlin suffered throughout the Cold War.

Altogether, these factors create a circumstance as unique as the one generated by the division. The following are its features:

- Berlin shortly redoubles its extent, peripheral boroughs become central, which implies a general re-distribution of urban functions and utilities, fringe neighborhoods become valuable
- Vast empty areas are still available in the city (very unlikely to happen for a metropolis of the nineties), waiting to be reconstructed since the Second World War: among these the strip of land (20 to 200 meters wide) previously occupied by the Wall, border installations and surrounding areas, cuts right to the middle
- A new capital needs to be rebuilt, besides, the capital of the strongest and most representative country of the ongoing European process of integration.

This unique historical circumstance gives the chance of including within one single act of planning the major issues defining the contemporary city, and of refunding the concerned disciplines at the symbolic term of the new millennium: a chance which opens up to great expectations, as well as to (possible) disappointment.

It is altogether clear that any assessment of what has or could have been done has to take into serious consideration the enormous problems related to the reunification and the historical

urgency of giving them an practical and visible answer, besides the costs of general conversion of the former GDR.

The Federal Government and the City Council do not hesitate to choose a pragmatic line of conduct.

## CRITICAL RECONSTRUCTION AND CITY MARKETING

While elaborating the first zoning plan (which necessarily requires a long time to be completed) a specific strategy of immediate intervention is put into action for the inner-city, where the most representative structures of the next capital will be located. This strategy is based upon two essential issues: the definition of a simple set of rules to allow public administration to check on the whole process, and the announcement of projects competitions for the most important areas, to guarantee the strongest unity of town design and architectural solutions.

The theoretical guide to this procedure is inspired by the principle of “critical reconstruction of the city”, which throughout the eighties had led the urban experimentation of the Berlin Internationale Bauausstellung for the housing. This principle is in brief the attempt of the architectural culture to conciliate the application of Modernism with the morphological order of the historical city, starting with the critical reading of the city constitutive elements: “ground-plan, construction, and appearance” (that is materials, proportions, typologies, etc.) as Josef Paul Kleihues defined them.

Nevertheless, this theoretical position is drastically reduced when it is transformed into a body of administrative rules: the ground-plan of the different city areas is to be found in the street and block pattern dating before the Second World War; the construction in the Berlin block-house typology with an uniform eaves heights of 22 meters; the appearance in the typical perforated stone façade of the XIX. century Berlin.

This simplification seems to give a solution to a twofold issue: on one hand the widespread psychological necessity, tending to remove the scars which along this century the city was marked by (any trace of the Wall within the urban area is in fact cancelled); on the other, private investors are interested in giving the highest building density possible to the downtown area. However, it contrasts the equally urgent need of self-promotion shared by architects and clients, given the commercial side of the whole operation, and the amount of money invested.

As a matter of fact the social focus around which the idea itself of a “critical reconstruction of the city” had been defined is left aside: that is, to recover the inner city for residential use, which appeared still feasible in the years of the I.B.A., when Berlin was not competing among the big capitalistic European cities. This way, the call to historical models looses its original pregnancy and becomes nothing but a question of style.

Quite paradigmatic is the case of Pariser Platz (also a very symbolic site), overlooked by the Brandenburg Gate. The Office of the *Senatsbaudirektor* (Director of Architecture to the Senate) defines for it a specific set of geometrical and compositional regulations, binding the rebuilding process to the original proportions: horizontal development of the façades, basements, cornices and window-sills heights. The square is brought back to its original layout including the set up of the green areas and the street furnishing such as fountains, street lamps. But, up until now, the spirit of the program is manifest in two buildings only: the twin



houses inspired by Schinkel's architecture, planned by Kleihues, replacing the historical Haus Sommer and Haus Liebermann at the sides of the Gate.

Other than that, the square is overlooked by two buildings by M. von Gerkan and F.O. Gehry which, behind the traditional stone façades, seeming to respect the set rules, hide respectively a big glass hi-tech courtyard and a typical "space-sculpture" by Gehry; by the restored to life Hotel Adlon, rebuilt in XIX. century style, to the nostalgic persons' and kitsch fans' joy; by the ruins of the Fine Arts Academy. The rebuilding planning of the latter was stopped, after the competition was won by the project of a steel and glass building, clearly questioning the indications declared by the *Senatsbaudirektor*.

The formalistic and post-modernist involution of the principles of the critical reconstruction becomes manifest in Hilmer and Sattler's redevelopment plan of Potsdamer Platz. Hilmer and Sattler in fact propose the eighteenth century geometric structure of Friedrichstadt beyond the physical boundaries of the historical city, locating it in an area which has never been familiar to that kind of pattern. Even the State Library and the Philharmonic by Hans Scharoun, relic of an idea of city - as displayed in his plan dating back to 1958 - like an archipelago of architectural islands on a green background, are caged with no mercy into a pattern of blocks. It is not by accident that the projects winning the following architecture competitions announced by the investors were the most remote, both in form and spirit, from the layout by Hilmer and Sattler.

Renzo Piano's plan for the area Daimler Benz succeeds in breaking up the rigidity of the grid, by means of an artificial lake, which literally gives back an insular feature to Scharoun's Library, originating a twisting movement between the Library itself and a new structure taking up its architectural language.

Within the same planivolumetric scheme set up by Piano, the block pattern is further misshapen by the buildings Richard Rogers plans, transforming the construction and appearance of the Berlin *Häuserblock* into a complex assemblage of hi-tech fragments.

Equally radical the project by Helmut Jahn, winner of the competition for the Sony area: he introduces an elliptical square inside a triangular block, covered by a futuristic big top; moreover, cinematic projections broadcasted on megascreens will make impossible for the visitors to locate themselves in an 'urban space'.

The strategy to plan buildings out of scale - not necessarily in the same provocative way of the Sony Centre - is rewarded as well in the competitions for the Parliament District on the Spreebogen and for the area of the Lehrter Bahnhof (the new central station of Berlin). In both cases, the problem of introducing elements of such a national relevance into a city planning is solved through the symbolic significance given to those edifices: respectively, a linear system of buildings crossing twice the Spree, and suggesting the idea of a bridge linking the formerly divided sides of Berlin, and a monumental gateway opening up towards the city, made by a vast transparent cover hanging between two parallel steel and glass buildings.

## THE CATALOGUE CITY

Altogether, the outcome of these competitions seems to diverge from the initial aspiration to put together the fragments of the two cities of Berlin, while keeping the values of the historical city. Instead, single urban units are given specific morphologies, shaped by architectural languages either not homogeneous or definitely clashing among them.



At the same time, the density of the interventions ends up for saturating the pattern of the archipelago (manifest in Scharoun's plan and made famous in the eighties by the work of O.M. Ungers), whose free intermediate spaces are narrowed down to the net of streets and rail tracks.

In fact the new city coming out of the closing yards is a different one: a city patchwork, or better a "catalogue city": a sort of updating of the propagandistic image of Berlin window of the West. Here, in a slightly baroque setting, the different products of contemporary architecture are displayed, more or less successful but all sumptuous, which enrich the already wide collection of models, prototypes, and unique pieces, left by fifty years of disciplinary debate around the reconstruction of the European city: from the experimental borough Hansa to the Märkisches Viertel, from Corbusier's Unité d'Abitation to the interventions of urban fabric mending and careful renovation of the I.B.A., from the fragments of ideal cities by Scharoun and Mies to real socialism's prefabricate high-density housing. These objects, witnessing very different cultural phases and approaches, have nevertheless something in common which is nowadays almost lacking: a confidence on architecture's and town-planning's leading role along the social process of a city development.

The efficacy of the public transport (especially the ones on tracks) makes easier, just like in a catalogue, the visitor's choice in front of the many available cities: the quantitative and technological development of transport, along with the decision to locate the widest tertiary and residential areas nearby the main knots of the railway network are the crucial issues of the zoning plan finally passed in 1994.

Outside the stage where the international stars of architecture create their urban visions, town planning policies assign the development of the transportation network the most significant role in shaping, on a wider scale, the backbone of the metropolis, resuming a planning tradition started in 1800, abruptly interrupted by the war, and suspended during the years of the divided city.

This system has therefore a twofold function: on one hand it guides the urban development of the peripheral and belt areas according to a polycentric pattern, preventing from the city sprawl and preserving the outermost city borders (whose mapping is thanks to the Wall still visible in these areas); on the other hand, in the inner-city, the system serves to the different urban objects generated by the projects competitions, making sure that they are easily accessible, and therefore compensating, from an instrumental point of view, for the lack of cohesion of the whole.